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THE BROKEN BOTTLE

By Kate Jordan

THERE it was, that little green bottle, shaped something like the pickle jar at home, bits of light-colored clay sticking to it, as if it had just been dug up in the back yard, yet it stood on a small pedestal on Mrs. Woods's drawing-room mantelpiece. Susy had often wondered why it had been singled out for this honor. To-day, having leisure and opportunity, she wondered more than ever.

She had come to play "house" with Emmy Woods, but had found her in the hands of the visiting seamstress. After an unpleasant three-quarters-of-an-hour, Mrs. Woods had politely dismissed Susy, telling her not to bang the street door after her, and the visitor had departed with a feeling of deep resentment.

With a dull Saturday afternoon stretching in grayness before her, Susy had crawled listlessly down the stairs, letting her arm slide along the smooth mahogany banister, until she had paused just before the open drawing-room door. It was then, as she stood peering into the shaded, hushed place, that the little green bottle had begun to interest her curiously.

Why should it be up there, enthroned on a pedestal? It seemed to her irritatingly "stuck up," as if it sneered down on the Dresden shepherd and his lass, and on the stuffed canary under a glass cover that kept looking up at it most worshipfully, as if it wanted to chirp:

"Cast but one glance on thine humble servant, O King!"

It was odd, too, that Mrs. Woods should put the bottle there for every one to look at, and *never have it cleaned*. Susy remembered that the first time she had seen it—oh, a very long time ago, maybe as long as six months—it had been very dirty, and dirty it had remained. The result of her reflections was a criticism of Mrs. Woods as a housekeeper, and a decision to use her own pent-up surplus activity in cleaning the impudent-looking bottle.

To this end she cautiously rolled over to the mantelpiece a rep-covered armchair. Very guardedly, a fixed, nervous smile of anticipation on her face, Susy took the bottle from its high place and, lifting the point of her apron, prepared to give it a thorough brushing. But her uneasy feet had pressed the armchair backward and she lost her balance. She fell against the mantelpiece and her clasp loosened on the bottle. With a dainty, tinkling crash it broke into splinters.

The suddenness of the disaster hypnotized her into inaction, and for a moment she could only stare at the prismatic hued wreck. With realization of her mischief, the thought of the wrath in Mrs. Woods's cold eyes made her cringe. She pushed the chair back to its place, stole from the room, and the previous direction to "leave the house quietly" was obeyed with fanatical exactness. No mouse ever crept out on a midnight reconnoitering expedition with more silken stealth than did Susy Gilvarry from the Woods home.

What was to be done? She must tell her mother, of course, and her mother would go and tell Mrs. Woods, making polite apologies for her child, after the manner of the Big People; and Mrs. Woods, no matter how furious she might be *inside* would also, following the same law, smile and say it did not matter in the least and that Mrs. Gilvarry must not think of such a trifle again.

Susy was, however, trembling and very awed when she reached her own home but a few doors away. Ellen admitted her, her expression sulky because her cheek was swollen.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Susy, is it?" she grumbled. "You forgot to wipe your feet again, too. How often will Peter have to wash the steps, I'd like to know?"

Susy did not seem to hear. With a preoccupied expression she began climbing energetically to her mother's room. It was empty. Neither was Margaret, the nurse, in the sewing-room, stitching as usual. There was no trace of her sister Genevieve, whom she had left in the back yard digging with her new spade. The library was vacant, too. The whole house was depressingly still.

A sense of personal injury began to inflate Susy, particularly when she realized that this being Saturday afternoon her father had left his office early—in fact, that the smell of his after-luncheon cigar was still in the library, though he himself had vanished. Where were they all? Why was she left alone in the world, and at a time when she badly needed an arm around her, a breast to shiver up against as she confessed her fault?

She hurried to the kitchen, but even cook, who generally welcomed her with a cooky, had other interests to-day; her son was visiting her, and cook was talking to him in a happy, excited way, with the big green butterfly bow which she reserved for great occasions plastered on her breast. Ellen was cleaning silver in the laundry, her cheek now wrapped in a small shawl.

"Where is everybody, Ellen?" Susy asked in an injured voice.

"Out," said Ellen thickly.

"But where?"

"Drivin'."

Time was needed for the bitterness born of this reply to have its full effect.

"Mama and papa took Genevieve—and didn't take me?"

"Don't bother me, Miss Susy," said Ellen. "Me face is ready to walk off me with the pain, an' me feet are in me knees."

"Driving?" Susy faltered. "But mama knew I was at Emmy Woods's. Maybe they drove there after I left," she continued in miserable yet hopeful speculation. "Perhaps they'll come back for me. I'll put on my Roman sash to be ready."

"They won't, then!" said Ellen, impatience and suffering making her brutally honest. "I'm thinkin' your mama said you might go into Mrs. Woods's, so they could take Miss Genevieve without you raisin' your usual ructions."

Susy stared at her. The rising tears retreated before a cold, dead feeling that in some subtle way was an awakening to a new, humiliating point of view.

"Sure they'll take you—next time," said Ellen carelessly.

Susy had too much pride to weep before the servants. She went back upstairs a different child from the penitent who had descended, yearning for her mother. She felt numb and a little sick, but there was a brassy flare in her brain that made her know things never understood before during all the eight years of her life.

She selected the most uncomfortable place she could find—the hard, ropey mat by the back hall door, under which the cold air crept—and there, hugging her knees, she gave herself over to her misery. *She was not loved. She was not wanted.* Her parents were gone, bearing Genevieve to glory and pleasure, the servants were cross; but, worst of all, Her Own Mother had suggested the visit to Emmy, to have her, the undesired and unloved child, well out of the way!

She wept as long as the tears would come. By the time her eyes were dry and burning she was hardened—a little Ishmael. If nobody loved her, why should she love any one? It was very evident that if she died no one would care. Even the thought that they would all be stricken with remorse as they gazed at her in her flower-trimmed coffin had cold comfort in it.

She began to look for the reasons which went to the making of this situation. Why did her parents love Genevieve better than they loved her? Why was she not adored as Emmy Woods was adored by her mother? Thinking of Emmy made her remember the green bottle, and that she had been seeking a sympathetic confessor to tell of its ruin when the knowledge of her unloved condition had come upon her. She now wove the thought of this disaster into the questions prompted by her sense of injury.

If Emmy had broken the bottle, Emmy, the pampered pet, who was loved and guarded both by her mother and her German governess—would Emmy be scolded? *No.*

If Genevieve had broken it—Genevieve, aged five, whom everybody kept kissing—would she be punished? *No.*

If her brother Bob had broken it—Bob, aged eleven, off at a boarding-school, whose homecomings were feasts, for whom the best of everything was kept—would he be punished? *Hardly*—nothing to speak of, certainly. He would hear a few regretful words and be dispatched to apologize to Mrs. Woods.

This was injustice, and Susy recognized it as such. She began to understand it in her own way: Emmy was an Only Child. Genevieve was a Youngest Child. Her brother Bob was an Eldest Child. But she had been placed by unkind fate in the most unattractive position possible—*she was in the middle.* She began to think that the fairy stories were wrong and that Cinderella *must* have been a Middle one. Well, what would happen to a Middle one when she, quite by accident, broke a green bottle? She would be taken sadly by her mother to a quiet library where her father would sit sternly waiting, and after a lot of talk about how awful she was, and what a disappointment to her parents, various punishments that she did not care to dwell upon, even in fancy, would be arranged for her.

At this point the instinct of self-defense brought her to a decision:

"If I say nothing about the bottle no one will know."

Her face brightened. Why not? Why confess and be punished?—she, the Cinderella, the unloved Middle Child? Mrs. Woods would fancy that Emmy had broken the bottle. Very well, let Emmy who had everything made pleasant for her, bear the blame. She, Susy Gilvarry, had trouble enough in her dark life without bothering about a nasty little bottle that must have been very cheap to break so easily. So, from a stumbling sinner she became an exultant one. When she saw Genevieve come back from her drive *with a balloon*, she almost did not mind, she was so wickedly happy in having put the onus of her own fault upon an Only Child. Her eyes were red, but a silence eloquent of dark things wrapped her about.

"Susy, dear," her mother asked, "what's the matter?" and she drew her to her, plaiting her hair afresh after the tender, busy manner of mothers. "Were you disappointed because you weren't taken driving to-day? I'm sorry, but there wasn't room for you in the carriage."

Susy wriggled from her. *Words! Words! Words!*

"On Saturday week, if it's fine, you shall come and Genevieve shall stay at home. Genevieve won't mind, will you—my sweet?"

Genevieve paused in her balloon-flying. She looked dubious.

"What would I do while Susy went away in the hansom?" she asked cautiously.

"Why, Margaret could take you to Central Park to see the lions."

"Oh, then I wouldn't care if Susy went," cried Genevieve.

"You dear, generous, sweet mite!" and Mrs. Gilvarry caught her and smothered her with kisses.

Susy had retreated to a corner, and her set mouth, her folded arms, were not unlike those of the exiled Napoleon's in the famous painting. The little scene had borne out her previous logic only too well. Of course when *she* was taken driving, something equally charming was provided for the Youngest Child. She went to bed that night a rebel, ripe soil for more deception if by it she could champion the Cause of the great army of unappreciated Middle ones.

But as is usual when one is eight, all this was almost entirely forgotten long before four days had passed. So many new and really pleasant things had happened, that dark reflections had been crowded out. On Tuesday, she had won praise in school for her realistic rendition of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and she liked to remember the hush after she had cried in her best chest tones:

"Theirs but to do and die—
Noble six hundred."

Also a new girl had said it was a shame to plait such curly hair as Susy had, and this had led to friendship, sealed and signed with many marshmellow drops, and other confections so dear to the childish heart. It was not strange, therefore, that on Thursday, when Susy reached home from school, she was genuinely light-hearted, and was about to run upstairs to show Genevieve the pinwheel which the new girl had given her when Mrs. Woods's drawling, discontented voice floated to her through the open parlor door:

"She broke it, my dear Mrs. Gilvarry, beyond a doubt. I am simply distracted. What shall I say to Uncle Roger when he comes back from Morocco? That Aztec bottle was as the apple of his eye. Every scrap of the lava adhering to it was dear to him. It was one of the specimens excavated during his first expedition to Yucatan, fifteen years ago, when he went for the Government."

Susy had come to a stand against the newel post of the stairs. Who was the *she?*—Emmy—or herself? And what did *lava* and *Aztec* and all the other strange words mean?

"I'm so sorry," Susy heard her mother say. "A lie to shield herself is the last thing of which I could have believed Fräulein capable."

The pinwheel fell from Susy's fingers, and a smothering sensation filled her throat and head. When at length she crept upstairs, not to Genevieve, but to the back hall window-seat behind the heavy rep curtains, she was cold and dismayed.

HE LIFTED HER IN A GENTLE, STRONG WAY

The whole story was clear to her. Emmy's German governess had been accused of breaking the green bottle, and it was not a green bottle at all, but something very wonderful and valuable that Emmy's old great-uncle with the copper-colored face had dug up somewhere and had given only as a loan to Mrs. Woods. Fräulein had always dusted the parlor ornaments and no one else ever touched the bottle. When Mrs. Woods found the fragments of the bottle swept into a corner behind the stuffed canary she had gone to Fräulein, who had burst into tears, but who insisted that *she had not broken the bottle.* And now an awful thing was going to happen: after four years of service as nursery-governess to Emmy, Fräulein was leaving in rage at being considered untruthful; only love for her charge would make her remain until the end of her month, two weeks off.

Oh, how fully Susy now understood all! Now she knew why the bottle had seemed dirty, and why it had been elected to a place of honor. Now she knew that Emmy, who was aware of its value, would not have touched it for the world. Now she knew that there was but one right thing to do—go at once to Mrs. Woods and tell the truth. But this confession had in its train such mysterious and perhaps painful consequences to herself that the thought made her actually ill. She convinced herself that, had the green bottle been in reality the common thing it had seemed, she would have hurried down and surrendered herself. But the fact that it was an incomprehensible treasure brought from a strange land by Emmy's great-uncle, frightened her. This Uncle Roger was the most forbidding person Susy had ever seen—old, so old!—with snow-white hair and face all brown and wrinkled. She had always feared him, and now recalled how on a certain day, when she and Emmy were playing near his chair, he had cried in a snapping voice:

"Oh, this drivel about the delight to be found in children! Confounded little pests, they drive me frantic! King Herod's example might be followed occasionally with good results."

Susy knew her Bible well—*King Herod had killed children.*

No—she could not tell—she could not—*she could not!* So began her double life.

During several days following, she had to listen to much about the green bottle and Fräulein. Her mother and father spoke of the matter frequently. In Susy's heart the consciousness of her guilt deepened hourly. She felt sorry for Fräulein, but not sorry enough to confess, for she excused herself by saying that she had known how precious the bottle was, she would not have touched it.

But an experience that left its mark upon her happened on Wednesday afternoon. This was a chance meeting with Emmy and Fräulein in Washington Square. Fräulein was sitting quietly beside Emmy, who seemed to have no heart to play. How sad she was, poor Fräulein! How she kept patting Emmy's mitten while her eyes looked far away! But oh, the unguessed coals of fire, when Fräulein had beckoned to her—to Her, the secret enemy—and tried to push into the pockets of her coat *more than a dozen peanuts quite hot.* Without speaking Susy refused this gift. She pushed the peanuts back into Fräulein's lap and walked very quickly away, her vision dimmed.

This occurrence destroyed her arguments for self-excuse and left her conscience smarting. Her guilt began to haunt her, as with an unlistening air she sat among people at home and at school. A persistent ache that ticked like a clock somewhere inside of her, gave her no peace, and a little, *little* voice kept speaking to her after this fashion:

"Poor Fräulein was always good to you, Susy. How lovely she was when she took you and Emma to Central Park. She never bothered, didn't keep saying, 'Don't do that' and 'Come here.' Then that day when she took you all the way to the Battery on the elevated train! And have you forgotten the Eden Musee, and the lovely tea she gave you afterward?"

But though tormented in this way, Susy persisted in her deception, and guarded her secret. Unhappy, with lips sealed, she mingled with the innocent and light-hearted.

Friday was story-telling day at school, a day usually much loved by her, but this week she was not in a mood to enjoy anything. She scarcely listened, until a phrase from an old legend read aloud by her teacher aroused her. This was about a young prince, who though beautiful to look upon, had done many and secret dark deeds. One blustery midnight, when his horse had almost plunged him over a cliff, a girl as fair as an angel had risen in the road and by a magic word had quieted the animal! Through love for her the regeneration of the wicked prince was begun, but he did not feel himself worthy even to touch her hand until by renunciation and self-chastisement during a long, lonely year in his sea-encircled castle he had purged his soul of sin.

Susy asked many questions about the self-immolation of the prince by which he was purified and made happy. After reflection the matter was summed up to her intelligence in one fact: that *by doing none of the things one liked, and only doing those which one could not possibly care about,* one might feel happy and good again. She could not live on bitter herbs as the prince had done; she was afraid to cut off her hair; she had no damp dungeon to sit in; she had never seen a hair shirt, and had no money to go shopping for one. However, she would do what she could. By luncheon the next day she had quite made up her mind.

Her aversion to soft-boiled eggs as "messy" was a family tradition. On this day there were soft eggs for Genevieve, but a big, baked potato with plenty of butter, pepper and salt had been prepared for Susy. She had never loved this flaky, steaming dainty more than as she pushed it from her, and said in a trembling voice:

"I want some soft eggs, please."

Mrs. Gilvarry, who had listened mystified, shook her head.

"I want them soft," Susy insisted. "The messy kind, like Genevieve's."

"What has happened to Susy, do you suppose?" Mrs. Gilvarry asked Margaret later.

"Miss Susy's had a strange look for days, ma'am," Margaret answered. "She's been going about on her toes as if she stepped on egg-shells, jumping whenever she's spoken to."

"I'll give her some rhubarb to-morrow," said Mrs. Gilvarry.

The mystery grew, when in the morning Susy said that she was glad she had to take the medicine. She also went smiling to the fortnightly hair-washing, nor did she even groan under the rinsing shower. On Saturday, when the promised drive was arranged, she amazed her parents by asking, sweetly, that Genevieve be taken in her stead, and suggesting that she herself help Margaret pull out bastings. Her mother, alarmed, began to think of those angelic children who always died young.

Besides this self-chastisement, Susy had been trying to smooth Fräulein's life. Since the day in Washington Square she had avoided the Woods house, but Genevieve as her ambassador had gone "bearing gifts" to Fräulein—a satin pincushion, a Mother Goose calendar, and a thick triangle of hot gingerbread, which Susy would have liked herself. Oh, she would do anything to make Fräulein happy—*anything*, except confess!

The terrible moment came, however, when she had to face the truth: None of these sacrifices brought peace to her soul. Twice in dreams she had seen the green bottle grown into an awful, living thing, with legs like a beetle and eyes like a frog as it danced before her. After awakening from this terror in the stillness of the house the little, *little* voice was heard so clearly:

"The days are going fast. You can't hold them back—no one can hold them back. Poor Fräulein will soon be gone. It will be too late then, Susy! It will be too late! Can you let her go away into the wide, wide world punished for you? Can you do this, Susy?"

Late on the next Thursday afternoon, Fräulein brought Emmy to call.

"Genevieve told you how I thought your presents lovely, Susy?" Fräulein asked affectionately. "You were so good to think of Fräulein."

Susy did not reply. She could only stare. The girl's face, so thin and grave, no longer broad and laughing, was a real torture to her.

"But why you don't come over to play any more with Emmy, dear Susy? Fräulein will soon be gone. Only till Friday am I here, *liebchen.* Then poor Fräulein goes far away."

Those words made Emmy whimper wildly. On Susy they acted like a lash, and she ran up the stairs, her face frightened.

By the time Susy reached the window-seat and had crept behind the curtains, *she knew.* As she laid her worn, little face on her knees, *she knew.* Happiness was not to be found again by any trick or evasion. Confession alone could silence that little, *little* voice.

Though harder to confess now than at first, she must do it. How? When? Should she go to her mother, or her father, to Mrs. Woods or to Fräulein? But she shrank from facing any of them. Selecting as a punishment the person whom she most dreaded, she decided to write to Mrs. Woods.

The opportunity came when her father and mother were dressing for the theater. She stole into the library, and climbed into the leather chair at the library desk. Her heart was full and she was cold from nervousness as she began in round, shaded letters:

"Dear Mrs. Woods I hope you are well and all your family. I am not so very well. I am sorry to say I broke your bottle and at first I thought that Emmy would be blamed and then I did not feel so sorry because she is an only child, and as I am a middel child that is not cared for so much by its family——"

Her father had come without her hearing him. His hand upon her shoulder was her first knowledge of his presence. She started violently, began to cry in a shivering way, and turning away pressed her hands to her face.

"Oh, papa, I am sorry," she wept; "I really *am* sorry—I—broke—broke the bottle!—oh, papa, papa!"

Susy heard the paper rustle, as her father took up the letter and after a pause laid it down again. A deep silence followed before he lifted her in a gentle, strong way and sat down with her in his arms, both her cold hands held in his big one.

"Now, little woman, tell me all about it," he said, and it was his tone that gave her courage to lift her head and gaze at him through her tears.

He said the words to her quite as if she were a Youngest or Eldest child—indeed, he could not have spoken with more love and understanding if she had been an Only child.